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FM AMEMBASSY TALLINN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8906
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL IMMEDIATE 0020
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [NATO](#) [AF](#) [UK](#) [EN](#)

SUBJECT: ESTONIA SUFFERS FIRST CASUALTIES IN HELMAND BUT
DETERMINED TO EXPAND PRT PRESENCE

REF: TALLINN

Classified By: DCM Jeff Goldstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Late in the evening on August 11, 37 Estonian soldiers came under attack at their temporary base camp in Garmsir (along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border), where they are serving as part of the UK-led PRT. The Estonians came under fire by 23 MM Sergei anti-aircraft rounds and/or rocket propelled grenades resulting in three Estonian casualties. Two of the soldiers are back with the unit while a third is still in hospital in stable condition at Camp Bastion.

¶2. (C) Although this is not the first fire-fight Estonian soldiers have faced in Helmand, these are the first casualties Estonia's PRT mission has suffered. MOD Director for Operations Taimar Peterkop told Poloff Aug 14 that this incident has had no affect on the Estonian Defense Forces (EDF) or the GOE's commitment to the mission and will not alter its plans to expand Estonia's presence in Helmand from 80 to 120 soldiers by the end of the year. Peterkop remarked that if they had wanted to avoid casualties, the Estonians would have remained in Garesk, in northern Helmand, where fire-fights were less common.

¶3. (C) Local press coverage of the casualties has so far been generally positive. While press coverage of Estonia's mission in Afghanistan has been sporadic, Acting MFA Director for Security Policy Arti Hilpus believes that this incident and any future casualties could raise the level of public interest. As part of the GOE's plan to raise public awareness and understanding of why Estonian soldiers are serving in Helmand, Defense Minister Jurgen Ligi will travel to Afghanistan on August 24-26 where he will visit Helmand to meet with the Estonian troops. A reporter from Eesti Paevaleht, one of the leading Estonian newspapers, will be a part of Liigi's delegation. As part of his visit, Ligi is also planning to travel through Kabul to meet

with the Afghan
Defense Minister.

¶4. (C) Comment. The GOE has always maintained that it was a question of when, not if their troops in Helmand would suffer casualties. In response to this incident, the EDF, MOD, and MFA have worked closely together to develop a mechanism to respond quickly to reports of casualties and offset any potential public backlash. GOE officials remain committed to the Afghan mission, which Peterkop and Hilpus have described on numerous occasions as Estonia's highest foreign mission priority. We do not expect any change in Estonian's plans to increase contributions to the mission in the coming months.
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